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THE NEW MOVEMENT IN THE THEATRE

BY OLIVER M. SAYLER

IN the theatre of our time there are forces at work which for want of a more concrete and definite term are usually designated by those who seek to control them as the New Movement. Although to many this nomenclature may seem hopelessly general and the concept which it seeks to express even more vague and inchoate, there is no escape from the recognition of impulses and aspirations which distinguish our stage from that of our fathers. The spirit of experiment which is abroad in the theatre may be partially a reflex of the general unrest of the age, but it has a genesis so far in the rear of the present day, and it has grown so rapidly through simultaneous development in all of the western countries, that it deserves consideration on its own merits.

The new movement in the theatre like all other impersonal drifts had its birth in a divine discontent with many of the conditions which the stage of the nineteenth century proposed to pass on to the twentieth, and a determination to vitalize and develop the isolated and groping efforts which had sprung from the experiments of Goethe and Wagner. It was dissatisfied with the plays which the dramatists were composing on traditional models; it was out of temper with the formal rut into which acting seemed to have relapsed; it was vexed above all with the cluttered and aimless stage settings which served neither the purpose of interpretative background for the plays nor the ends of intrinsic beauty. In sum, it was irritated by the complacent routine into which the entire process of the theatre had fallen. The leaders of the movement deplored the neglect of the fundamental motive of the theatre: to appeal vividly to the emotions of its audience.

To make the experience of attending the theatre more vivid, to restore the thrill, the terror, the exaltation, the ecstasy of sitting at a play—this, it seems to me, has been the guiding impulse of all those who have made dynamic use of their dissatisfaction

with the old theatre. To be able to discern in their instinctive urge and their concrete results a continuity which extends from Moscow to New York and from realist to symbolist is reasonable testimony to the existence of a legitimate trend and a sound psychological basis for it. If we can justify the interpretation of the new movement in the theatre as a composite of forces seeking to revivify our stage by heightening the emotional reactions, we shall have a thread running through diverse and contradictory phenomena which may resolve their apparent paradoxes.

Despite several desultory beginnings during the last century, the first clear-cut realization that the theatre had lost its emotional heritage and that it was time to attempt to restore it, came almost simultaneously, a little over two decades ago, to Gordon Craig in England, to Adolph Appia in Switzerland, and to Constantin Stanislavsky in Russia. These three men, working independently, perceived the existence of a problem of the theatre and set out, each in his own way, to solve it. The conditions against which they all protested had been the growth of years, the blind, unintentional incrustation of centuries upon the living body of the theatre. They proposed not to create a new art but to release an old one from its chains and permit it to develop freely under the impetus of its inherent nature. The art of the theatre should not return to the habiliments it wore in the time of Sophocles or of the Italian *commedia dell' arte*, or of Elizabethan England. That would be merely an archeological trick without significance for the emotional demands and opportunities of to-day. Instead, it should strip itself bare of its modern nondescript garments, look with respect and intelligence toward the past and then reclothe itself as its most eager and alert imagination might suggest.

Before Craig and Appia and Stanislavsky, the imaginative theatre was weakened by an aimless, inexperienced comprehension of the fundamental laws of aesthetics. Simplicity, emphasis, balance, form, suggestion—none of these was sufficiently understood even by so great a master of his art as Irving, largely because Burne-Jones and Alma-Tadema, who designed his settings, were unable to think of the theatre in terms of a separate art. And the realistic theatre, likewise, stopped far short of conviction in

its effort to copy life. Reality and unreality often rubbed shoulders at the same time, in the same play. The output of the stages of the 'nineties and the remnants of those days which have persisted until now, were neither flesh nor fowl nor good red herring. To put an end to this futile impasse, and restore to the theatre its rightfully vivid command over the emotions, Craig set out to eliminate realism, to make the theatre more theatrical; Stanislavsky devoted himself and his instrument, the Moscow Art Theatre, to the cause of overcoming the foes of realism, of perfecting the illusion of reality; while Appia, concerned less with either of these extreme solutions, suggested the atmospheric use of light to fuse the jarring elements of the old theatre and provide a plastic background for the movements of the players. All three strove for a clarification of the emotional appeal of the theatre.

Craig's concern for reinstating the emotions in the theatre is implicit in nearly everything he has written in his books, *On the Art of the Theatre* and *The Theatre: Advancing*, and in his journals, *The Mask* and *The Marionette*. It is explicit in many notable passages, only two of which can be quoted here. "The duty of the Theatre (both as Art and as an Institution)," he writes in the foreword to the prospectus for his school, "is to awaken more calmness and more wisdom in mankind by the inspiration exhaling from its beauty. . . . Unimportant is it what subject the artist turns to—his pleasure is to illumine all that he touches so that it shall shine brightly." And in *The Theatre: Advancing*, with the backward glance toward the Greek stage which seeks inspiration rather than an antiquarian holiday, he writes:

The audience went to the theatre, *not for diversion; not to forget, but tingling to remember*. To remember what? To remember *vitality*, and longing to hear a song about it; dying with impatience to see a play full of it; not with a hectic modern madness or the madness of pain, but with the madness of delight. . . . The Theatre is not a gloomy place, nor a side-splitting place; it is an exciting place, where each man, whether on the stage or in the seats, lends himself to contribute to the excitement—the excitement of Belief, not the excitement of Make-Believe; Reality, not Sham.

With these aims in mind, Craig in his latest book proposes two theatres to replace the present one: a Durable Theatre, devoted to the most universal dreams of the human imagination, housed

in the noblest structure hands can build, arrayed in precious vestments, and interpreted by a kind of priesthood of players who devote themselves to their art with ascetic zeal; and a Perishable Theatre, where improvisation and spontaneity rule, where the spirit is that of "go-as-you-please" as in the *commedia dell'arte*, and where the elegant, the exquisite and the grotesque chase each other across the scene in airy and light-fingered or intentionally awkward exuberance. Each of Craig's two theatres makes for unity and definiteness and intensity of emotional appeal. The belief he demands is the belief of honesty; the reality he seeks is the reality of recognizing everything as it is and of living up to the pretension. His Durable Theatre is intended to stir the profounder emotions as they have been stirred in times past by religious rites and by the drama which sprang therefrom. In its exalted reality it is something finer than sham. His Perishable Theatre sets its cap at the lighter, though not necessarily the inferior, emotions; it is the sublimation of the impromptu humors and graces and absurdities of the vaudeville and the circus. It, too, is finer than sham, for it is honest.

In contrast with Craig, Stanislavsky chose out of the chaos of the old theatre the very element which Craig discarded: its function of interpreting life by representation. His goal frankly was imitation, make-believe, sham, but a sham so convincing, so fortified with illusion that it would serve the ends of belief and reality. He would copy life so faithfully that he would create the impression that this *was* life which passed on his stage. The merely superficial representation of life, Stanislavsky discovered, would not suffice. Without the inner psychological truth, the outward aspects were dumb; and so through years of experiment, the Moscow Art Theatre finally perfected its process of spiritualized realism, of depicting both explicitly and implicitly the intangible and elusive as well as the obvious phases of life.

Unrest in the theatre, however, did not cease with these two widely divergent secessions nor with Appia's more particularized solution. The Russians themselves have been Stanislavsky's most relentless critics. Terminating his early association with the Moscow Art Theatre, Vsevolod Meyerhold took up a position at the utter pole from realism. He had become persuaded that

realism, no matter how thoroughly perfected, could not be made really emotionally convincing in the theatre. Why try, therefore? Why not admit that the theatre is a theatre, that it is all make-believe and pretense? There are other emotions and reactions than those which the realistic theatre seeks to arouse; very well, let us make our appeal to these emotions with the curtain removed and the house lights bright; let us change our scenery before the eyes of our audience; let us talk with them about our play and take them into our confidence. That is the line of Meyerhold's reasoning, a line which carries him near to Craig's *Perishable Theatre*, and links him with Max Reinhardt in Germany.

Still seeking homogeneity and keenness of emotional effect, but understanding the obstacles inherent both in representative realism and in the theatre as circus, the Kamerny, Russia's newest stage, has set for itself the task of combining the essential and workable elements of the methods of Stanislavsky and Meyerhold, a task which Reinhardt, too, has attempted in his later productions. In realism the Kamerny detects a neglect of the sense of form and of gesture, expedients which possess great dynamic value in their power over the emotions; in the theatre as circus, form and gesture seem to be cultivated at the expense of a warm, personal intimacy which realism alone has heretofore utilized in arousing the feelings of an audience. From both of these theories the Kamerny has tried to choose the vital elements which work upon the feelings and to fuse them in varying proportion according to the nature of each individual play.

One of those who has gone wholly outside the traditional theatre for his solution of the problem is also a Russian, Nikolai Yevreynoff, proponent of Monodrama. Deploring the diffusion of interest in the existing theatre like the rest, he has not been satisfied with reviving or reforming that theatre or with devising new means of interpreting old plays more eloquently. Yevreynoff objects primarily to the scattering of the emotional forces of the theatre which results when we extend our sympathy and our interest to one character after another in a play. He intends, therefore, to seize upon the normal and instinctive proclivity of the audience to identify itself with a succession of characters, limit that identification for the sake of emotional emphasis

to a single figure, which he calls the Ego, and present everything else which appears on the stage—the scenery, the other players, and even the leading figure himself—not as they are but as this leading figure perceives them. The Ego, therefore, becomes a prism through which everything passes on its way to the spectator, and it is conceivable that such a technique in the hands of a master might rouse intense emotional interest.

To the Germans rather than to the Russians went much of the early credit in this country for the new movement in the theatre. The prejudices of war and a broader international outlook, however, brought to light and to acceptance the contributions of Moscow and Petrograd at the expense of a temporary eclipse of German efforts. A calmer mind now should be ready to admit once more the services which the German stages have performed for the movement. The German theatre was better prepared, perhaps, than any save the Russian for the sympathetic recognition and nourishment of such a movement. From the time of Goethe and the Meiningen players in Germany, just as from the days of Pushkin and Gogol and Griboyedoff in Russia, the theatre has been generously supported as one of the arts. It was natural, therefore, that the publication of Appia's book, a direct outgrowth of the Wagnerian tradition, the visit of Gordon Craig to Germany in 1904, and the dramatic renaissance in Russia, should make more articulate these latent influences and stir to greater activity such artists as Max Reinhardt and Georg Fuchs who, in Berlin and Munich, were already at work. The activities of the Munich school found expression in so-called stylization, the symbolic simplification of background and the use of rhythmic form to knit together the several scenes of a play and establish a unified emotional line, as well as in a reformation of theatre architecture reaching culmination in the Künstler Theatre. This latter aspect of the Munich group is typical of the mechanical preoccupation of the German movement, a phase which in the form of variously movable stages and lighting equipment it has carried farther than any other country, sometimes to the enhancement of the movement but often to its spiritual impoverishment.

The outstanding figure in the new movement in the German

theatre, after all, is Max Reinhardt. Around him has centred a storm of praise and incrimination. He has picked up many of his suggestions with an imitative hand, but he has put this borrowed material to practical and often original use, and in addition he has been the pioneer with his theory of the Theatre of the Five Thousand, with his productions of *Ædipus* and *The Miracle* on a vast circus-like scale, and with his attempts by this and other means to bring players and audience into more intimate co-relationship. Since the Armistice, Reinhardt's most radical outposts have been surpassed by a younger group of more positive purposes, the "Expressionists." This group has caught up the symbolic motive of the Post-Impressionists, the Cubists and the Futurists, distilling and intensifying it and making it subjective to the point where the emotional reaction of the spectator is akin to madness.

Considering the confusion among creative artists over the proper path to a new theatre, it is not surprising that the public mind has exercised an indiscriminating choice among opposing forces. Thanks to promiscuous and vaguely defined standards, the Diaghileff Ballet Russe, in its entirety, has been widely admitted to a prominent place in the movement, although it belongs there by virtue of two distinct contributions to a more vividly emotional theatre, which stand out from the general body of its work: the fusing of all the elements of pantomime, dance, music, and setting, into a unified whole in the ballets of Stravinsky and the brilliant and exotic costumes and settings of Bakst, Benois, Golovin, Roerich, and other artists. The latter contribution, oftener than not, has been so startling as to throw the finished production out of that balanced proportion which the new movement has sought primarily to attain. Nor has the Russian Ballet been alone in this one-sided development, for wherever the scenic background has been so surprising as to draw attention to itself, its intrinsically emotional values have been a detriment rather than an advantage to the theatre.

It is significant of the present poverty of the French, the Italian and the English theatres that Copeau, the foremost artist of the French theatre, a man of eclectic rather than of creative faculties, has made the single original contribution to the new movement

of an extremely simplified stage whereon the actors' efforts could be emphasized; that the Italians have disclosed only a sporadic gift in the futurist, Marinetti; and that the English are represented only by the exploits of Granville Barker as a producer in imitation of Craig by second remove through Reinhardt. The futility of the contemporary English desire to restore to the theatre its emotional rights seems to be typified by the spiritistic dramas of Sir James M. Barrie.

America, on the other hand, is rife with experiments leading toward a more vividly emotional theatre. Results are finally appearing from the leaven introduced by Craig's writings, by rumors from Moscow, by the fleeting glimpses of Reinhardt's *Sumurûn*, by the return of observant travellers like Robert Edmond Jones, Sam Hume, Kenneth Macgowan, and Hiram K. Moderwell, by Sheldon Cheney's intuitive interpretation of men and methods from afar, by the chronicles of the Boston *Transcript* under H. T. Parker, and the *Theatre Arts Magazine*, and by the advent of Maurice Browne and Joseph Urban to work among us. A movement foreign in its sources and its inspiration is in process of becoming thoroughly and honestly American. Its imitative period is passing with the development of original native ideas, with the increasing assurance of hands apprenticed abroad, with the growing freedom and expanding numbers of independent groups like The Theatre Guild and The Provincetown Players in New York, and with the tolerance which the commercial theatre is beginning to extend to new ideas.

So far as the new movement in the American theatre has been intelligently conscious of its aims, it has found expression almost wholly in the work of its scenic artists. The designers have progressed more rapidly than the writers and actors and producers of plays. Unless these other partners in the problem awake to their opportunities and responsibilities, unless they provide the designers with something to challenge their impatient powers, another instance may be added to the long record of artistic miscarriages due to the failure of all the necessary component elements to appear at the same time. It will not do for the scenic artists to rest on their oars and wait for the others to catch up with them, for their gifts would then be atrophied. Either they

will have to stimulate their co-workers with some of their own enthusiasm or they will have to learn the other crafts of the theatre and perform the whole task themselves.

There is evidence to-day that both of these processes are under way. Already, we have a producer in the heart of Broadway, Arthur Hopkins, who is facing the problem of making the theatre more dynamic, not in a weakly imitative way, but with the stubborn belief that we can contrive our own solution. The last two seasons, too, have revealed a playwright in Eugene O'Neill who comprehends the function of feeling in the theatre but ties himself to no single limited channel for serving that function; imaginative drama, such as *The Emperor Jones*, is as spontaneous with him as the stark realism of *Diff'rent*.

American designers, though, are not waiting for new plays to be written and new theories of production to be devised or revived from the past. Side by side with his labors as designer for Arthur Hopkins' revivals of *Richard III* and *Macbeth*, Robert Edmond Jones has been applying a keen and original imagination to the task of foreseeing what the theatre of the future may be like. That theatre, he thinks, may disclose a poet who expresses himself not necessarily in words, but by those media which give a sense of significant form: color and light; detached, evocative words; the beginnings of gesture; masks; less of character drawing and more of the embodiment of abstract passions; characters depicted as larger than life—not *über*-marionettes nor supermen, but groups of men, viewed as from an aeroplane, forgetting themselves as individuals with everyone lost in a common pursuit; and scenic setting not like a picture but resembling rather a picture puzzle with the essential elements withheld until the meaning of the play is disclosed as a whole. Such a play in such a theatre, he believes, might consist of a few hundred scattered words and page on page of stage directions. In all this, Jones is struggling to formulate a theatre which will leave the utmost possible to the imagination of the spectator.

Norman-Bel Geddes, another designer who has carried the principle of significant form to eloquent realization on both the operatic and dramatic stages, is likewise reaching out through metaphysical channels to a theatre which will have deeper, more

compelling emotional power. Geddes believes that even those playwrights who have achieved intense command over the feelings by what seems to be the most concentrated economy of means, have missed a large share of their opportunity by failing to take cognizance of the great impersonal forces which control human life. He would dramatize these forces, therefore—such a force, for example, as that which manifests itself at one time as love and at another as hate. If he embodied them in form or aspect visible or tangible to the audience, he would disclose them as affecting more or less powerfully the individuals in a given scene according as they approached near to those individuals or receded from them. In any case, whether they were embodied or not, he would have the playwright work with them in mind to the end that his play would gain astonishingly in relentlessness, intensity and emotional tenacity.

Another of the designers of the younger generation, Herman Rosse, an architect by training, would remake the stage and auditorium of the theatre in various ways in order to conform to the divergent demands of the several forms of drama which the new movement has developed or suggested. Rosse is deeply interested, as well, in the possibilities of moving scenery—either actually moving or giving that effect by projected light—for the sake of a background which will flow in plastic line with the course of the dramatic action and unify the performance. There are other forces, other personalities, contributing to the new movement in the American theatre, such as the revival of the use of the mask by Rosse and Jones and W. T. Benda; and the dramatization of an entire community which Percy MacKaye has attempted in his civic masques.

There is hardly a phase of the new movement in the theatre which is not beset with obstacles to its effective realization. In some cases the difficulty seems to be inherent in the proposal or in the psychological equipment of the normal human audience; in others it seems to arise from the imperfection of the mechanical and spiritual means at hand, a difficulty which may conceivably disappear with the improvement of the one and the exaltation of the other. Realism as a method of artistic expression, even when utilized with the patience and thoroughness and insight of Stanis-

lavsky, appears to have ingrained in it a double defect; the inevitable element of approximation and the lack of symbolic gesture and rhythm amounting to an unavoidable loss of significant form. In general, too, it must be obvious that whenever the thought of mechanism obtrudes, then the expedient becomes a mere trick and defeats its purpose. The arbitrary and unrealistic use of light, for instance, especially the rapid change from one color to another, such as Maurice Browne and some of the Russians are accustomed to utilize, must have almost superhumanly expert control to avoid this pitfall. Another impediment to effective emotional control appears when symbolic methods are pushed so far along arbitrary lines that a key is necessary to avoid confusion.

The most discouraging obstacle thus far encountered, though, is the lack of coöperation on the part of contemporary playwrights. The newer developments in dramatic theory and practice, it would seem, should serve as a challenge to the dramatic author. With the exception perhaps of Tchekoff and Gorky, who did their best work under the stimulus of Stanislavsky and the Moscow Art Theatre, the new movement has had slight assistance from the writers of plays; and the proponents of theory, the builders of theatres, the producers of plays, and the designers of settings and costumes have been thrown back on the revival of works out of the past. Until the playwright of to-day composes drama intended especially to be interpreted by these allied forces, the movement cannot attain its complete fulfillment.

As a result of these obstacles which extreme theories seem to carry with them, the future course of the new movement in the theatre is likely to be eclectic, fusing into a form of compromise the most valuable elements of conflicting theories and thereby cancelling their weaknesses. The success of opposing methods, however, is only to be expected in the light of the wide divergence in human sympathies and preferences; but where individual theories and methods remain, they will do so because they have proved to be effective in stirring the human emotions.

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